T.S. Eliot's Negative Self-Consciousness: Depersonalization in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and "Little Gidding II"

| 埴田 実紀 |
| 人文論究 |
| 40 |
| 2 |
| 94-105 |
| 1990-09-15 |
| URL | http://hdl.handle.net/10236/5559 |
T. S. Eliot's Negative Self-Consciousness: 
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1. The Beginning

T.S. Eliot's earliest essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) establishes a guideline for his future career as a poet. Eliot thereafter constantly tries to put his poetics as presented in this essay into the actual practice of his poetry itself.

One chief concern of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is Eliot's unique consciousness of "depersonalization," the extinction of a poet's personality. He discusses this "impersonal theory" from two standpoints; the diachronic and the synchronic. The first part of the essay focuses on the diachronic aspect, that is, the relation of an individual poet to other poets, especially his predecessors. Here he argues that "any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year" should acquire "the historical sense," which "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."(1) And this basic statement of "the historical sense" is applied to poetry in the context of "tradition".

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You

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cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (2)

As a result of acquiring "the historical sense," the poet will attain to the condition of "depersonalization".

What happens is a continual surrender of himself [i.e., the poet] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. (4)

This concept of "depersonalization" assumes its synchronic aspect in the second part of the essay, where Eliot develops his impersonal theory in the relation of a poet to his own poem. The emphasis here is put on the construction of new "feelings which are not in actual emotions" gained in the poet's personal experiences. Eliot gives some successful examples, such as Dante's Canto XV of the Inferno, of how new "feelings" are expressed as a "new compound" of the "numberless feelings, phrases, images" which remains in the poet's mind ever after the actual events in his life. (4)

Then comes the conclusion of the second section of the essay:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (5)

The final sentence of the quotation above tells that the "depersonalization" is held not as the denial of a poet's personality but as a way of surviving in "Tradition" as the "individual" poet by escaping from his own personality. Eliot here characterizes an ideal poet whose works reveal

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(2) "Tradition," p. 4.
(3) ibid., pp. 6–7.
(4) ibid., p. 8.
(5) ibid., pp. 10–11.
his "individual talent" without being "personal," i.e., by the negation of his personality. And Eliot's further efforts as a poet are possibly all directed towards this ideal image.

2. The End

Eliot's last poem *Four Quartets* (1943) seems to be a fulfillment of the prophecy of his earliest essay.(6) Just as its opening three lines ("Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past.") recapitulates the basic idea of "the historical sense," so the poem itself is an embodiment of the "presence" of the past, in the sense that it reflects numerous reminiscences from his own past poetic works as well as those of "the dead poets."

The essence of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" mentioned above is most clearly witnessed in the second part of "Little Gidding II," with which Eliot had to struggle to the very end of its composition.(7) Eliot seems to have ended his exploration of poetry when the abstract goal predicted in theory at the beginning of his poetic career is completed in practice by his creative spirit of figuration.

The passage in question shows a dramatic meeting of the "I" and the so-called "familiar compound ghost." The use of an approximation of Dantean *terza rima*, and the several allusions to *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* easily enable the reader to know that Eliot "attempted to reproduce in English what he felt to be the distinctive quality of Dante's poetic style."(8)

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(8) ibid., p. 63.
In fact, it is obvious that this passage was intended to be a new "canto" to follow and "challenge" his own "dead master." Among the allusions to Dante, the chief is the Canto XV of *Inferno*, in which Dante meets his "dead master" Brunetto Latini. Thus, the meeting of the two figures is doubled; the one of Dante as the "ghost" and Eliot as the "I" and the other of Brunetto as the "ghost" and Dante as the "I."

However, the "ghost," who is given no definite name, can be identified with no single "master." Nor is the new "canto" a simple reproduction of Dante's Cantos. Although Eliot uses an imitation of *terza rima*, the tone of this new canto sounds far from the powerful Dantesque. A good example of the difference would be the opening eleven lines:

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending
After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
    Had passed below the horizon of his homing
While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin
Over the asphalt where no other sound was
    Between three districts whence the smoke arose
I met one walking, loitering and hurried
As if blown towards me like the metal leaves
    Before the urban wind unresisting.

As A.D. Moody points out, "the fixed metre and the fixed line length are more like the death-mask of blank verse than any live form of it" and "[w]hat he has done, by subduing stress to quantity, is to lower the life and energy of his language," yet at the same time "[i]t has power," "the negatively directed power — which is not the same thing as a negation of energy — of one whose "life is in the world's decease.""

Indeed, it is this narrative, the "poetics of detachment" in Moody's words, which effectuates the "uncertain" feeling of the whole atmosphere in these lines, introduced as a prelude for the entrance of the "ghost" with ambiguous features. The characteristic uncertainty of this passage also serves as a remarkable contrast with the expressive and intensive terza rima of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," a masterpiece of Romanticism:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened Earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The metallic discordance of the "dead leaves" in "Little Gidding" may be almost a parody of Shelley's romantic golden-trumpet-like tenor of the "Wind," which is ready to "Drive" the poet's "dead thoughts over the universe/Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth." Nevertheless, the reader here does feel an echo from Shelley's "Wind" through the rattling "sound" of the "leaves" which signifies their movement caused by the "wind," with the word "wind" remaining unexpressed until a few lines later ("the urban wind"). Furthermore, Shelley's voice through Eliot gives a feeling of "a new birth" of the "withered leaves" in a form of a poem to the general atmosphere of the inferno, the desctruction by the fire-bomb. Thus, in the first eight lines Eliot deliberately constructs a unique feeling of an "uncertain" combination of death and a new life which neither Dante nor Shelley ever produced. The narrator's eyes perceive "one" figure "blown" like the "leaves" from nowhere, whose
unsteady way of walking corresponds well with the uncertain ground of the verse.

The narrative through the eyes of the "I" becomes more conscious of the figure in the next passage:

And as I fixed upon the down-turned face
The pointed scrutiny with which we challenge
The first-met stranger in the waning dusk
I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.

The "unidentifiable" appearance of the ghost reflects the manifold character of the whole passage, in which "many" echoes from different "dead" masters can be heard: Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Dr. Johnson, Tompson, R. Browning, Shelley, Coleridge, Arnold, Kipling, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Yeats, etc. A reading of this canto in the context of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" shows it to be an allegorical epitome of tradition and the individual talent. Each individual poet represented by the "I" is inevitably related to tradition, which is, like this ghost, "one" "compound" of "many" "dead" poets.

Eliot's canto, however, is not a mere pastiche of different masters' works. It should be noted that Eliot composed his own verse on the basis of the very Canto (Inferno XV) that he had quoted as a model of "depersonalization" in his earliest essay, since this part is the ultimate of his attempt of "depersonalization." Eliot later recollects the composition of this canto in "What Dante Means to Me" (1950):

... here I was debarred from quoting or adapting at length — I borrowed and
adapted freely only a few phrases — because I was imitating.\(\text{\textsuperscript{00}}\)

In the canto, Eliot gives new birth to the voice of "Tradition" in a way of "imitating" which differs from the quotations from Dante, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Ovid, Spenser, etc. in *The Waste Land* or the adaptations from Donne, Marvell, Keats, etc. in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. His act of "imitating" may be traced back to the "deeper imitation" in "The Music of Poetry" (1942), parallel to "Little Gidding":

It is not from rules, or by cold-blooded imitation of style, that we learn to write: we learn by imitation indeed, but by a deeper imitation that is achieved by analysis of style. When we imitated Shelley, it was not so much from a desire to write as he did, as from an invasion of the adolescent self by Shelley, which made Shelley's way for the time, the only way in which to write.\(\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\)

This "deeper imitation" reinforces the significance of the poet's "surrender of himself" in the impersonal theory.

The following part of the canto where the first speech is issued allegorically reflects the "imitation":

So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another's voice cry: 'What! are you here?
Although we were not. I was still the same,
   Knowing myself yet being someone other ——
   And he a face still forming; yet the words sufficed
To compel the recognition they preceded.

Who is the speaker, the "I" or the ghost? Who is "another"? As the subject of "heard" is the "I", "another" should be the ghost, but the original typed draft of the first two lines shows another possibility:

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\(\text{\textsuperscript{00}}\) Eliot, "What Dante Means to Me" (1950) in *To Criticize the Critic* (Faber, 1965), p. 128.

And I, becoming other and many, cried
And heard my voice: “Are you here, Ser Brunetto?”

These lines indicate that “another” should be taken to be “another” part of the “I,” who assumes “a double part.” The double possibility of the “another” in the final text, thus, makes “What! are you here?” suspended between the two persons. The boundary between the “I” and the ghost is obscure here. This ambiguity should be regarded as a deliberate contrivance to sound the “voice” in unison of the both. Keith Alldritt reads this passage in the context of the “deeper imitation.”:

“imitation” is a matter of “being someone other” verbally, an act of empathy, a realisation that, because of language, the self is constituted of other people and of the dead as well as the living.

Here the “I” is found to “surrender” himself to the ghost, who is “something more valuable,” by escaping from his “personality” or the self-consciousness (“myself”) and accepting the “invasion” of the ghost’s “self.”

The transformation from “Ser Brunetto” in the original draft to the simple “you” in the final text raises another argument. “Are you here, Ser Brunetto?,” an exact quotation from Dante, would help the reader identify the ghost with Dante and would ultimately emphasize the single echo from this great “master” in the whole poem. On the contrary, the italicized “you” in small letters, a more universal pronoun indicating “Both one and many” is fitter here to characterize the obscurity of the ghost, who is “some” one “intimate” enough for the “I” to recognize as “you” but at the same time “unidentifiable.” And the nonchalant

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tone of the narrative reflects that the “I” does not force himself to identify the ghost with any particular “master.” He leaves himself open to the “invasion” of any master’s “self.” His “imitation” here assumes a more universal aspect than “a deeper imitation” as an enthusiastic attachment to a particular poet, whose way is “the only way to write.” In fact, Eliot, in a note to The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (1933), criticized this “imitation” of a single poet as a “writing under a kind of daemonic possession by one poet.” He further argues that this “possession,” often found in a poet’s “adolescence,” should not be confused with the true poetic experience and concludes that, in the “mature state of enjoyment of poetry,” a poet would be face to face with different poets beyond the stage of enthusiasm. In the context of The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, the “I” in the poem is a representative of a “mature” poet, conscious (“Knowing”) that his self (“being”) is “someone other” by consciously assuming “a double part, without being beside himself to be possessed by one poet. And the composition of this canto itself may be a result of the true “depersonalization” through the “imitation” by the poet who is, in Moody’s words, “striving to become wholly conscious of — the timeless mind of Europe. For this is an enactment of the poet’s surrender of his own personality to the authority of Tradition.”

Thus, the narrative of the second part of “Little Gidding II” constructs a polyphonic space of “Tradition,” where numerous echoes from the “unidentifiable” poet, including those of Eliot’s own past self, resound through the constant mutation of the voice of Eliot’s own self as the composer of this canto. Yet the whole music of this poem belongs to no other

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(5) Moody, p. 252.
poet than T.S. Eliot himself. Eliot in his lecture on Yeats in 1940, two years before the publication of "Little Gidding," claimed that he owed a great amount of the composition of this "impersonal" canto to Yeats, a poet of "impersonality ... who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth, retaining all the particularity of his experience to make out of it a general symbol." (6) Through the negation of his self, Eliot constructs a "general symbol," new "feelings," or "significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet." (7) Eliot, now however, does not merely wish to "escape from" his "history" of "personal experience" but retains it. He finally restores his individual voice, just as the "I," whose one "part" remains "still the same" and is conscious of "another" part surrendering to some other's self. In fact, Eliot plays "a double part" of composer and conductor and does not play a trumpet like Shelley. He keeps control of an orchestra made up of many dead masters to perform a universal symphony of his own masterpiece.

Gardner emphasizes Yeats' influence to Eliot in her Composition, pp. 63–69.
Leonard Unger points out the allusions here to several works by Yeats: "The Spur," "An Acre of Grass," "Vascillation" V, "Sailing to Byzantium," and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" in his Eliot's Compound Ghost: Influence and Confluence (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), p. 113. To these I would add "Byzantium": The Purgatorial dancing of the spirit in the flame in Yeat's poem ("Where blood-begotten spirit come/And all complexities of fury leave,/Dying into a dance,/An agony of trance,/An agony of flame that cannot sing a sleeve,//Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,/Spirit after spirit!") is found in Eliot's lines 144–46 ("From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit/Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire/Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.").

(7) "Tradition," p. 11.
3. A New Beginning

As discussed above, Eliot's canto has a feeling of a "new birth." Indeed, as Eliot writes in his letter to John Hayward, he wanted "the effect of the whole to be Purgatorial which is much more appropriate [than Infernal]." The whole movement of the poem is "the way up": from the dawn to the "day-break," from the end to the beginning, from death to a new birth. Accordingly, the allusions to Dante beginning with Inferno ends in Purgatorio (Canto XXVI). A similar modulation is also found in Miltonic echoes; from the image of the "dead leaves" found in Paradese Lost ("autumnal leaves that strow...," Book I. l. 302) to that of "a dancer" moving "in measure" in Paradise Regained in (All heav'n/Admiring stood aspace, then into hymns/Burst forth, and in celestial measure mov'd," Book I. ll. 168–70). The stage is set at "this intersection of time," reminiscent from "the time of tension between dying and birth" in Eliot's own Ash Wednesday VI. This canto itself lies in the "intersection" of his career as a writer. His final letter to John Hayward about the canto suggests his consciousness of the limits of poetry:

I think that there is a point beyond which one cannot go without sacrifice of meaning to euphony, and I think I have nearly reached it... There will still be the possibility for alterations in proof. But to spend much more time over this poem might be dangerous. After a time one loses the original feeling of the impulse, and then it is no longer safe to alter. It is time to close the chapter.99

The impersonal character of the poem discussed above approaches the realm of a Shakespeare drama as Eliot later praises in "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953):

98 Gardner, p. 186.
99 ibid., p. 196.
The world of a great poetic dramatist is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden. 

Indeed, the canto appears a great poetic drama, in which the invisible Eliot "is everywhere present" like an echo "Imitating" the voices of "dead poets."

In the canto, an end of Eliot's poetry, is a new beginning of his career as a poetic dramatist. This poem is a portrait of an individual, T.S. Eliot himself, an artist who ceaselessly attempts to "fare forward," being "still and still moving/Into another intensity."

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